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DE RUEHUJA #1661/01 1810834
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 300834Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6317
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001661

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/19/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: DEFEAT OF THIRD TERM BOOSTS CREDIBILITY OF
POLITICAL PROCESS IN NORTH

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell Hanks for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The intense mobilization over efforts to lengthen President Obasanjo's tenure in office seem to have had a positive corollary effect in Northern Nigeria of injecting a much needed breath of fresh air into the stale political process. The defeat of the proposed constitutional amendment allowing the President a third term has energized key Northern elites, who are now focusing on developing a strategy for the 2007 elections. Notwithstanding this burst of optimism, many people who met with a visiting USG delegation in the North acknowledge that the legacy of electoral problems in 1999 and 2003, continues to cast an ominous shadow over the process and preparations for the 2007 elections. END SUMMARY.

EFFORT TO DEFEAT THIRD TERM CREATES A SENSE OF UNITY

¶2. (C) On a recent swing through key the Northern Nigerian cities of Kaduna, Zaria, Kano, Sokoto, Gusau, Maiduguri, Jos and Damaturu as part of a USG search for Muslim extremism, three important themes involving the Nigerian political process emerged. The first was an overwhelming sense of relief and happiness that the third term effort was defeated. Most interlocutors who met the assessment team called the defeat a "victory for democracy," helping to unite people across ethnic, religious and even regional lines. Supporters of the third term were thus seen as simply opportunistic and/or corrupt politicians who were not representative of anything other than their own narrow personal interests.

¶3. (C) This successful exercise in coalition building provided a rare opportunity for politicians to rally Nigerians around a unifying position. The USG was credited with having made timely and clear statements which our interlocutors understood almost unanimously, to have been against the third term, and thus in line with the thinking of most people in Muslim northern Nigeria. This created a palpable sense of goodwill towards the USG and its efforts to support democracy in the country.

ORGANIZATION IS SEEN AS THE KEY TO AFFECTING CHANGE

¶4. (C) The second, more subtle, theme was that the defeat the third term proved political organization and strategic action could make a difference, even when underfunded in comparison to wealthy opponents. Many of those who spoke to Poloff said the successful efforts had led to raised expectations. One contact in Kano said constituents asked "if you can defeat the third term, why can't you organize a company to give us light or water." In Kaduna, the head of a leading Muslim NGO made up of political activists said the

third term saga confirmed that people of conscience must step into the leadership vacuum. Towards that end, she said, activists were pursuing a two-pronged strategy.

15. (C) The first strategy, she said, was to develop a leadership blueprint for 2007. Capable people were elected in 2003 but many were overwhelmed by the responsibilities of office and had no specific plans or ideas for meeting the challenges. The group is pushing the idea that an informal think tank of activists should be proactive in suggesting priorities and developing plans that capable leaders might use as a blueprint for action. This might include development and political priorities for each of the Northern states.

16. (C) The second strategy was to actually seek out and recruit credible candidates for various offices. She suggested one of the themes that her group was recommending to create interest and credibility for their candidates would focus on the introduction of policies and programs "which would support a socially equal and just society." This, she suggested, would make ordinary citizens more likely to see themselves as stakeholders in the political process.

REALITIES ON THE ROAD TO THE 2007 ELECTIONS

17. (C) A more pessimistic note was voiced by representatives of a Kano-based NGO which works with street gangs (Yandaba). The ability to influence gang members, who are a key component in electoral violence and malfeasance, was less likely to be accomplished because of the amount of time it took to debate and resolve the third term issue. With time running out before elections, many NGO activists said that politicians would soon be up to their old electoral

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tricks of contracting the Yandaba for a variety of purposes including intimidating opponents, and thus likely to negate the nascent efforts of pro-democracy reformers and activists. A similar phenomenon in Maiduguri also seemed to be set to disrupt the political process with gangs of youths already active and identified with specific state politicians.

18. (C) With the major political parties in disarray, many people pointed out to Poloff that confusion and violence could as easily result from intra-party competition as from the long-standing inter-party rivalries. Both scenarios could be exacerbated by attempts by term-limited governors to anoint their successors and thus control the politics of their state. Competition between senators, who want to become governors, and governors, who have nowhere to go politically, was singled out as a potential flash point for violence and a key factor affecting state politics.

19. (C) There was an almost universal lack of confidence in the ability of the Independent Nigerian Electoral Commission (INEC) to organize free and fair elections. The corruption of the electoral process, according to many people interviewed, started with the politicians at the top and spread throughout the electoral machinery. The only way to counteract that was for voters to actively defend their mandate, something that people in Kano proudly pointed out they had done in 2003.

110. (C) A professor at Bayero University in Kano noted that the elites competing for power and influence could be broken down into three groups: the Western educated, traditional leaders (including traditional religious leaders), and every day religious leaders. Among these three groups, he said, religious leaders, comprised mainly of local Imams would have the most direct influence on how people vote and, as a result, politicians had already started making their rounds in order to win endorsements for 2007. This observation was confirmed in discussions with two prominent Imams in Kano who suggested that they both wanted to influence and well as be influenced.

BUHARI MAINTAINS A LARGE BASE OF SUPPORT

¶11. (C) In conversations with Poloff during the trip through the North, the one candidate whose name came up most frequently and favorably was General Muhammadu Buhari (the 2003 ANPP candidate widely believed to have won the election), who was often mentioned as the antithesis of the normal Nigerian politicians. He was generally described as the one who could "put things right." With many people in the north expressing a deep antipathy for the Obasanjo administration, most contacts told Poloff's that it was the North's turn to produce the president, and that the person who had the necessary qualities needed to rein in an out of control system was Buhari.

¶12. (C) Many people mentioned his no-nonsense manner, and his aversion to corruption as the traits which voter's most admired. He is seen as a politician who could break with the past and clean up Nigerian politics by bringing some order to the chaos. Many people saw his image as an anti-politician as his greatest strength and weakness. As a result, many people told Poloff that they believed that Buhari would be unable to garner the support of the political class, who see a Buhari administration as a threat to their own political and financial interests. "Most potential financial backers," one contact told us, "believe they would not get their return on investment if they back Buhari."

¶13. (C) Support among northern Christians, who spoke with Poloff, was decidedly less enthusiastic, as many referred to him as a Muslim chauvinist, giving as proof a statement from 2001, since discredited, calling for Muslim solidarity. Other critics of Buhari noted that despite some positive characteristics, his inability to play the political game, including building coalitions, raising money, getting international support and effectively getting out his message to groups not already predisposed to him, would ultimately doom his candidacy.

¶14. (C) Comment: The defeat of the third term has created, in northern Nigeria, both political space and a glimmer of optimism about the on-going political process. Numerous structural issues remain in ensuring credible elections, but an apparent willingness by many people in northern Nigeria to engage in the process is an important first step in helping build the momentum desperately needed to achieve credible elections in 2007. While Buhari is clearly the favorite candidate in the region, his lack of political organization and savvy are rightly viewed as weakening his position in the upcoming elections. Still, his stand on policies "with a

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human face" and his promise to deal with corruption resonates strongly with millions of Nigerians, especially, though not exclusively, with those living on less than a dollar a day.

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